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Return of the Agrarians

A symposium marks the fiftieth anniversary of their manifesto

MOST OF US probably would not want to be called to account in our old age for ideas we espoused in our youth, but the three surviving Vanderbilt Agrarians did not seem to mind it at all when they appeared before an overflow audience at Underwood Auditorium November 1.

Robert Penn Warren, A'25, Andrew Lytle, A'25, and Lyle Lanier, A'23, are still standing just about where they were a half century ago when they and nine other essayists published *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*.

The three were back at Vanderbilt October 30-November 1 to participate in a scholarly symposium sponsored by the University to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the book. With their old friend, literary critic Cleanth Brooks, A'28, serving as moderator of a panel discussion, they reflected on what they had written in 1930 when first they sounded their warnings about the threat industrialism posed for the South and its culture.

"The indictment of industrialism that was pretty general in *I'll Take My Stand* . . . was a gross understatement," psychologist Lyle Lanier declared. "The development of nuclear science and engineering changed the whole ball game. . . . The situation today is far more serious and far more difficult to control." He cited the degradation of the environment, depletion of natural resources, industrial impairment of human health, and urban ghettos that have developed in the past half century. "The issues are more crucial than they were in 1930," he added, declaring that the threat today is not only to the values—tradition, family, religion, art, and the land—about which the Agrarians were concerned fifty years ago, but also to life on this planet.

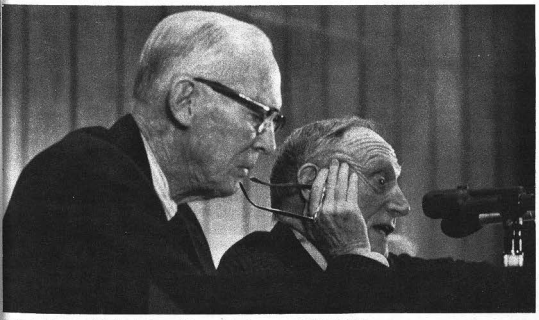
"We were far better prophets than we knew," observed novelist Andrew Lytle, former editor of the *Sewanee Review*. "My particular interest was the small farm as the source of strength for the state. The family has to have a location, be fixed somewhere. You've got to have an old grandmother in the back room who says to have your tongue pulled out before you lie. . . . The alternative is a police state."

Warren, Pulitzer prize-winning poet and novelist, said the Agrarians were right to be concerned about the depersonalizing effects of industrial society. He admitted, however, "We were weak on what to do about the dangers. We were dead center on negative."

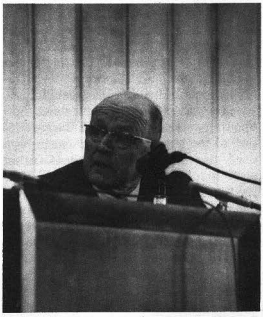
Twelve Southerners, ten of them graduates or faculty members of Vanderbilt, contributed essays to *I'll Take My Stand*. Some but not all of them were poets who also were associated with the magazine and the movement known as "Fugitive." They dedicated their book to Walter L. Fleming, professor of history and dean of the Graduate School at Vanderbilt "to whom some of the contributors owe doctrine and example, and all would offer this expression of perfect esteem."

In the November-December 1930 issue of the VANDERBILT ALUMNUS, Mrs. Mapheus Smith, then librarian of the University, reviewed the book which just had been published by Harper and Brothers, New York. "The twelve authors, writing independently," Mrs. Smith commented," have produced a book which attacks the central issues and fundamental psychology of industrialism as a way of life built on a social and economic technique that has not justified itself. They define a positive philosophy of the agrarian way of life, as a true antithesis to industrialism and the only reasonable or effective counter-force in the field of economics, politics, religion, art, and ways of life in general. Obviously, the year 1930 has not brought forth a more timely volume."

The book included an introductory statement of principles, followed by these essays:



Lyle Lanier and Robert Penn Warren during panel discussion



Andrew Lytle

"Reconstructed but Unregenerate," by John Crowe Ransom; "A Mirror for Artists," by Donald Davidson; "The Irrepressible Conflict," by Frank Lawrence Owsley; "Education Past and Present," by John Gould Fletcher; "A Critique of the Philosophy of Progress," by Lyle H. Lanier; "Remarks on the Southern Religion," by Allen Tate; "Whither Southern Economy?" by Herman Clarence Nixon; "The Hind Tit," by Andrew Nelson Lytle; "The Briar Patch," by Robert Penn Warren; "The Life and Death of Cousin Lucius," by John Donald Wade; "William Remington: A Study in Individualism," by Henry Blue Kline; "Not in Memoriam, but in Defense," by Stark Young.

Of the twelve authors, only John Gould Fletcher and Stark Young were not Vanderbilt men.

It is remarkable, declared Louis D. Rubin, Jr., professor of English at the University of North Carolina, "for a polemically designed book to speak to people fifty years later."

Rubin, who has written two different introductions to editions of *I'll Take My Stand*, was one of the visiting scholars who participated in the three-day symposium marking the book's anniversary. "The importance of *I'll Take My Stand* is principally literary," he contended. "It's argument is effective because it makes an imaginative, emotional appeal as well as a logical one."

Louise Cowan, A'50, PhD'53, another participant in the symposium, declared, "The total purpose of *I'll Take My Stand* was defense of the traditional virtues of Western man."

Chancellor Heard, who greeted symposium participants and guests at the opening session, noted that the publication of the book had great meaning for the University and its history. As other participants were to point out, *I'll Take My Stand* appeared in sharp contrast to the vision of a New South then being espoused elsewhere in the region. It was notably in conflict with the views of sociologists at the University of North Carolina whose book *Southern Regions* was influential at the time. As George Core, A'59, MA'60, editor of the *Sewanee Review*, emphasized in a

From left are Robert Penn Warren, A'25, Walter Sullivan, professor of English; Andrew Lytle, A'25, Lyle Lanier, A'23, William Havard, professor of political science; and Cleanth Brooks, A'28, literary critic who moderated the panel of Agrarians. Sullivan and Havard were organizers of the symposium.

speech at the symposium, the authors were not universally heralded even on their home ground at Vanderbilt.

"I believe it was 1935 that I read *I'll Take My Stand*," said Chancellor Heard, who was then a student at Chapel Hill. "I remember still the sense of irony, enigma, and puzzlement that was stimulated in me by the book. I was drawn to the themes in it by sentiment and consciousness and heritage, and away from it, in those depression years, by the directions of regional development that seemed called for by the times."

Another participant, John Shelton Reed, professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina and author of *The Enduring South*, cited the "irony of having a sociologist from Chapel Hill on this program. . . . We are not reading *Southern Regions* today; we are reading *I'll Take My Stand*. You have won, Oh Tennesseans."

Other principal speakers at the symposium were Robert B. Heilman, professor of English, emeritus, University of Washington; Charles Roland, Alumni Distinguished Professor of History, University of Kentucky; and Lewis P. Simpson, Boyd Professor of English, Louisiana State University.

The symposium at Vanderbilt, organized by Walter Sullivan, professor English, and William Havard, profes of political science, was one of seve symposia on *I'll Take My Stand* held universities around the country dur the book's golden anniversary year.

Disillusioned about the benefits of dustrial development, concerned abo preservation of the environment, an feeling that something has gone awry the social fabric, many persons are fi ing themselves in sympathy with th views expressed by the Agrarians fif years ago.

Lanier, who is executive vice-president and provost emeritus of th University of Illinois, postulated that "We are coming into a stage of post-industrial society—one in which aggresssive efforts to increase growth a accumulate wealth cannot continue cause it means mass suicide. . . . Hum values have to change."

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Reflections on the Agrarians

By William E. Leverette

Half a century ago Vanderbilt University was the intellectual center for a group of writers who thought that greater urban and industrial growth for the South would not only be deplorably Yankee and vulgarly commercial, but immoral and ungodly. It would, they thought, destroy a traditional way of life that was ennobling, emotionally and economically right, and aesthetically pleasing.

These writers, who became known as the Vanderbilt or Southern Agrarians, thought the South should stay wedded to its agrarian ways, based on a wide degree of small property holdings, including local and small scale commercial enterprises. "Modern" achievements like technology and electricity should be limited to clearly perceived human purposes, responsive to individual and community use and control.

Politically, the Agrarians wanted to restore regionalism, a measure of political and economic independence for the South in a reorganized and decentralized American federalism. They believed in decentralization of all institutions as salvation against the dehumanizing centralization of life in modern societies. They opposed massive economic and political power in any form—finance capitalism, fascism, or communism.

The Agrarians stood for a society made up of small, middle class, independent farmers, sometimes including the plantation owner and even the independent black farmer. They wanted to restore the land to the people—the honest, religious, hard-working people, who also had a sense of simple pleasures, domestic crafts, and the graces of unhurried life. Men should live in harmony with nature, they said, not seek its conquest. Those who lived simply and frugally were more likely to have true freedom.

According to these writers, the rest of the country had forgotten these truths. Absentee landlords and non-Southern interests now owned the land. Multitudes of farmers had been first corrupted and then enslaved by urban lures of material things. Multitudes of others had fallen into the near-slavery of share cropping and tenantry.

Fifty years after the Agrarians called for the return to a simpler way of life, some people are doing it

The Southern Agrarians, signing themselves "Twelve Southerners," achieved a degree of national prominence with the 1930 publication of their declaration of Southern cultural independence, *I'll Take My Stand*. Coming the year after the onslaught of the Great Depression, the book's criticism of industrial capitalism and its whole-hearted support of apparently regressive economics was bound to create a stir. Since the writers admitted mulling over their ideas at least five years before the book's publication, they seemed to have anticipated the collapse of the economy. At any rate, many of their criticisms paralleled Marxist complaints, but more nearly the outcries of the Romantic poets and isolated geniuses such as Thoreau.

But the Agrarians deplored communism and finance capitalism as equal threats to the society they favored. Throughout the thirties they took issue with anybody important or otherwise who proposed massive schemes to solve the great social and economic problems infecting the United States. Their targets included the planners and bureaucrats of the New Deal, for which they had limited hopes at one time. Socialists, big business, the left-tending major journals such as the *New Republic*, even the patron saint of American-style social democracy, John Dewey—all fell short because all proposed more organization, more complexity, more centralization.

To be sure, the mainstream thinking in the thirties ran counter to the Agrarians' nostalgic view. Planning, spending, alphabet agencies, quasi-socialist experimentation, currency manipulation and just plain tinkering dominated the New Deal. A few programs of the type the Agrarians liked were tried, but not the way they or other champions of homesteading liked. The New Deal, followed as it was by World War II, was another massive centralizing enemy of true liberty. Few in the South, especially farmers, followed many Agrarian prescriptions beyond planting gardens, which they did anyway. No doubt many were self-subsistent on beans, fatback, and collards, but hardly out of choice.

Now and then the Agrarians sounded nostalgic and unrealistic, racist and elitist, economically ignorant and provincial. But despite their shortcomings, they impressed a few critics such as Edmund Wilson and Crane Brinton, sophisticated Yankees, who found their message unrealistic but beguiling. The Agrarians were after all sophisticates themselves, with a delicately poised provincial tone.

By the late 1930s they had turned increasingly to wider fields—history, poetry, literary criticism and fiction. Among them were some of the great and near-great figures in twentieth century American literature and scholarship, including Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Donald Davidson, and Frank L. Owsley.

When I returned home to Nashville in the late forties after "my" war, I enrolled in Vanderbilt, because most anyone who grew up in Nashville went there, or perhaps Sewanee. Vanderbilt was "the" quality school for the mid-South, its leading university, with a reputedly superior med school. It was where most of one's friends went. It offered a pleasing mix of as much academic seriousness as you wanted, lots of girls and parties, a little art and theatre, plenty of sports, spectator and otherwise. All in all, a darn good school, well supported by Nashville's affluent. We, the students, weren't even aware that it needed to be anything

William E. Leverette, A'50, MA'51, PhD'63, is professor of history at Furman University. He commutes to the campus in Greenville, South Carolina, from his home on the side of a mountain near Tuxedo, North Carolina. He and his wife designed and constructed their house almost entirely by themselves, a feat to delight any Agrarian.

Some newer professors wanted Vanderbilt to forget the Agrarians and join the modern age

by national standards. (The Grand Ole Opry, by the way, was going strong, and we went, but that institution was not the city's major claim to fame.)

But for me Vanderbilt also exerted the pull that it had been the home of the Southern Agrarians. One or two of its history and political science professors, and the most awesome of its English professors, Donald Davidson, had been members of the group. Most of the Agrarians (and Fugitives, a group of philosophical poets and critics who were also Agrarians) had left by the time I got there. But their spirit still pervaded the university, although the golden age was past.

Some newer professors thought it was high time. They wanted Vanderbilt to forget the Agrarians and join the modern age. They wanted it to join the post-war rush for prosperity, industrial growth, internationalism, objective scholarship (publish or perish) and soon, plastic shine.

All this is my memory and can only count as such. But I know that in addition to the usual faculty divisions over purposes and the curriculum best suited to them, Vanderbilt did have a kind of Battle of the Books going on. The traditionalists, whether Agrarian-Fugitive shading into New Critics (English) or disciplinary-objective (English and history), seemed to have the side of wisdom but lacked, I thought, a sense of the broader, changing world. The modernists were mostly discipline-bound pros on the make for publishing and better jobs, slick, shiny and shallow.

Brought up in Nashville as I was, I thought I stood for tradition, the Old South, a secure society of established and accepted ranks, good manners, food, and conversation—plus a lot of time in the woods and country. My politics were conservative. One side of Vanderbilt seemed suited to me; the other was irritating but excited my curiosity.

I thought I wanted truth and beauty, within the limits of a moderate and tasteful hedonism. Above all I wanted an interesting life; the army had made me dread boredom and monotonous tasks. A life of service to others had some vague appeal, provided it did not get too much in the way of pleasurable activities. All in all, I was a typical veteran who went to college and drifted into the smugness and self-centered materialism that is commonly attributed to those who entered adult careers in the 1950s.

Focusing my academic interests on English and history, and later philosophy, I finally decided to teach history, hoping to deal with something called the history of ideas, especially how science affected other areas of thought. By taking this direction, I resolved certain problems that I foresaw for my conscience if I specialized in anything related to the South. I was able to dismiss my Agrarian mentors as brilliant essayists on values, who had, however, no real practical relation to the ongoing twentieth century. Gradually becoming mildly liberal in politics, I spoke out for civil rights, but did little, entered the perilous adventures of marriage and parenthood, making middle-class ends meet, teaching college history.

Why go into such a personal history in an essay on the Agrarians? First, I do not believe that many scholarly types enter their speciality for *purely* intellectual reasons. One has emotions and loyalties. That is certainly the case with me. My concern with history is a concern with self, with loved ones, friends, colleagues, students, ideas of value, with objects I like, with pleasures I want to keep enjoying. Man is the only valuing animal, hence the only one capable of deliberately destroying or enhancing what he loves.

That is what history is all about, behind the abstract-sounding generalizations, a systematic inquiry into the dreams and hopes men have been capable of, and what was good or bad, practical or foolish in their behavior. Why they failed. And what may still be of value. This is another reason I have again become interested in the Agrarians. It is a question of values, and their possibilities to guide life.

In the last two years I have learned that the Agrarians were not only restating in their own way an old vision of the goodness of pastoral life as an alternative to urban industrialism. They were also part of a chapter in our history not yet fully told, the story of men reacting to events they found unpleasant by reformulating values of a past time. Such reactions to industrial change have taken many forms, including calls for a return to nature or to the land, as well as demands that society be completely restructured.

Two responses in particular have come to interest me recently. One embraces the conservation and preservation movements. The other is the back-to-the-land movement appealing to urbanites frustrated by the problems of modern city living which increase with the decades—crowding, pollution, high costs, standardization, and unhealthy and unnatural living conditions.

Since the 1890s the conservation and preservation impulses have captured some loyalties; the back-to-the-land notion has appealed to others. The conservationists have said that if we want to thrive and survive, we must use natural resources wisely and sparingly, under the guidance of science, but using technology with care. The preservationists say that if we want to save some places where God is exhibited in all his grandeur, we will have to keep some wilderness, excluding technology and sometimes even man himself. The back-to-the-landers say that to have the health and peace with nature our ancestors had plus economic independence and some control over our lives, we must find a little place in the country, work hard, and use only the technology we clearly need and can control.

The Agrarians agreed with conservationists in their desire to conserve the land from heedless commercial exploitation, although their intent was not to conserve for future exploitation. In this they placed a religious value on nature they were similar to the preservationists but they hardly yet saw the virtues of wildnerness. The Agrarians were obviously sympathetic with the back-to-the-land movement.

Now what does all this mean in an immediate practical way to a professor no longer young, who claims to have something to teach to students? What one honestly has to admit to himself as his students in the last quarter of the

After three decades of incredible prosperity and energy profligacy, the trend is now toward accepting less.

ttwentieth century is that there are trends rand events enough to make anyone lose his nerve. Enough to make anyone doubt inot only technology but more fundamentally the American or human capacity to take rational action on the basis of wise, moral and considered judgments. We do seem to have worked ourselves into a corner by developing a civilization and life style dependent on a level of consumption for which the resources will not be available much longer. We are faced with problems, absolute and relative, no other period in history has faced, and all the sweet and sanctimonious pseudo-optimism of the white middle class of my generation cannot explain away these facts.

Nor is there much use in criticizing the generation which came to maturity in the 1950s, which fought and won the war and did what it could to understand and reconstruct the world, by its own limited wisdom and with considerable positive reinforcement in material goodies which are now running out. That is my generation and our failures are obvious. We had it both tough and good, and we seem to be leaving our heirs in a terrible world. But we do not welcome the deluge which comes after us because—very simply—we love our children, our students, and our rapidly aging Mother Earth. (The saddest thing about getting older, or studying history, is learning you have lost your favorite scapegoats. The older generation is now you.)

But perhaps there is some hope. Today conservative programs are increasingly attractive to many people in a nation and world in which the economy is threatened by such massive forces as energy shortages and inflation. Fortunately or unfortunately, economic questions appear to dominate at the moment. Conservation is likely to attract the most support, as millions see the threat of drastically reduced energy. The Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society, tiny but very vocal minorities of the middle class, increasingly support concepts of wider appeal than wilderness preservation, such as anti-nuke campaigns and education, alternative energy sources, and urban park and garden programs.

Whereas both conservation and preservation were once mainly elitist movements, their contemporary proponents see that the issues facing society today are fundamentally related to human survival, not just to middle class interests—comforts, renewable resources, adventure and immersion in nature.

The back-to-the-land movement today is also booming, among many people who doubtless never heard of the Southern Agrarians. Home gardening is today America's biggest outdoor activity, in terms of numbers of participants. There is a decided population shift toward rural areas and small towns. The Department of Agriculture's 1978 *Yearbook of Agriculture* heralds the change in its title *Living on a Few Acres*. Millions are turning to supplying some of their needs by home production, rather than shopping center purchases. Hundreds of thousands are building parts of their own homes, if not the total structure. The wood stove and fireplace have again become sources of heat for those lucky enough to secure wood. Individuals, groups, colleges, and increasingly government sponsored agencies are experimenting with wind and solar energy.

After three decades of incredible prosperity and energy profligacy, the trend is now toward accepting less, using less, and conserving what you have. No one, of course, can offer any statistics for most of these facts (although the next Census probably will). In addition, the people primarily involved are probably mostly middle class, those with enough to say they can now limit their needs. Unfortunately, this generalization holds true for nations: the less fortunate nations may not be willing to limit consumption.

The counterculture of the sixties led the way, to some extent, in the search for self-sufficiency and simplicity. If the American middle class today has not for the most part adopted the community arrangements of some of the dissenters of that troubled decade, many are looking for a simpler, more secure, more individually responsible way of life.

It may be that none of these developments can overcome the powerful inertia of modern history. As with the Agrarians and decentralists of the 1930s, such piecemeal, small-scale efforts of individuals do not promise to have much effect on the stupifying problems confronting us today. In many cases too, decentralists and others of like mind have seemed more concerned with their own liberty than with social needs, even lacking in compassion. But if one believes that among life's desirable goals are economic independence, simplicity, close ties to small community, and harmony with nature, then one must make the effort—whatever the trend of history.

If their values are difficult or impossible to live by in today's world, do the Agrarians have anything to offer besides fine prose? Perhaps not. But are self-sufficiency, nature, community, a sense of control, tradition, religion, courtesy, and conversation outmoded altogether? True, we could not have gone to the moon in a decentralist economy. Or been blackmailed by the OPEC countries. We couldn't wage nuclear wars either, or defoliate small Asian nations, or "bug" our neighbor's privacy. We would be too busy working the land. One has to make one's choices. For me at least, the Vanderbilt Agrarians illuminated some of the values by which such choices can be made. □

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